

ARTICLE APPEARED
 IN WASHINGTON POST
 DATE 28 January 1985

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Another Kremlin Death Watch

Yet another "death watch" over the Kremlin by U.S. policy-makers has concluded that President Konstantin Chernenko's death would continue weak rule by the Soviet gerontocracy rather than challenge President Reagan with a new generation of resilient and imaginative leaders.

It is a fact established beyond reasonable doubt both by State Department diplomats and the CIA that, one year after Yuri Andropov's death, the 73-year-old Chernenko is seriously ill. Private, though still unconfirmed, word has been passed to appropriate American officials by the Romanian intelligence service that the third supreme Soviet leader in two years has suffered a stroke.

Surprisingly, the charismatic Mikhail Gorbachev, at 52 the Politburo's youngest member, is no longer considered the heir apparent. The Politburo is viewed here as ready to gamble with another elderly stalwart—possibly Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, 75—rather than hand power to the new generation that never knew Joseph Stalin. That view by responsible officials in the Reagan administration suggests power in the Soviet empire is still split along the fault-line of age, playing into Reagan's hands.

In the words of one administration official, Gorbachev made "too much of a good thing" out of his visit to Britain last fall, stirring jealousy among the old guard. Secretary of State George Shultz was told several days ago by ex-Carter administration foreign policy specialist Zbigniew Brzezinski that some Eastern European communist leaders believe Gorbachev is being groomed to succeed Gromyko in the Foreign Ministry.

Blocking Gorbachev or Grigory Romanov, the former Leningrad party leader, who is young by the Kremlin's standards at 62, makes Reagan's second-term push for nuclear arms reductions seem all the more dynamic. It would guarantee continuance of sluggish Soviet policy-making, ruling out bold initiatives in arms control or decentralization of the domestic economy, which now approaches gridlock. It once again would sacrifice a chance for daring Soviet open-field running against the United States.

Reagan proved last year that he could test Soviet arms control policy and compel it to change. The Russians walked out of both strategic and European nuclear missile talks—then gingerly returned when Reagan made credible his commitment to the Strategic Defense Initiative.

When Washington policy-makers saw Gorbachev's immense success on his British selling tour, they uneasily watched an expert performer capable of charming the Western news media. Gorbachev took on attributes of a dangerous adversary who could influence

public opinion against the United States.

But a Politburo decision to stay with the gerontocracy would not likely present a similar threat—not even with the wily Gromyko and his knowledge of the West and command of English. Neither would Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov, 79, nor Viktor Grishin, 70-year-old head of the Moscow party organization.

The emergence of any one of these power-huggers—Gromyko, Tikhonov or Grishin—would replicate last month's selection of the new defense minister. The choice of Sergei Leonidovich Sokolov, an unexciting 73-year-old bureaucrat, to succeed Dmitri Ustinov, who died at 76, confirms Washington's judgment that the Politburo is not looking for bold breaks with the past. "They couldn't bite the bullet after Ustinov," one official told us. "Biting it after Chernenko won't be any easier."

That leaves President Reagan and

his imaginative arms reduction policy facing Soviet trench-warfare tactics and a reduced element of surprise. The Kremlin must find a way to revise current positions to make concessions if there is to be real progress in the talks, and that demands resilience and daring—precisely the qualities now lacking in Moscow.

Moreover, the firmness of the U.S. position is not yet understood in Moscow. Max Kampelman, the new chief negotiator, wants on-site inspection to verify agreements on mobile missiles. He favors immediate construction of a \$60 billion system providing "limited" defense against Soviet nuclear attack.

Such major departures from pre-Reagan arms control tactics would challenge resourceful minds of the younger men in the Kremlin. For the entrenched old guard, they threaten stalemate that would make the successors of Chernenko look bad and Ronald Reagan look good.

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